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efforts to look to the future. Of course, I pledge that my door will always be open to visit with you or any other Nebraskan about an idea or proposal you have for property tax relief. Our common search for new ways to help homeowners, farmers, and ranchers, and all those who feel the burden of property tax continues. Now let me turn my attention to a more efficient state government, a government more responsive to the needs of our citizens. Along with your Natural Resources Committee, I am proposing the merger of the Department of Natural Resources and the Department of Water Resources. I ask you to approve this merger because it is good public policy. It incorporates the functions of these two agencies into a single state agency. We expect that this merger will improve service, coordination of resources, and eliminate the confusion over which agency sets important state water policy, and cause efficiencies and savings in future years. In this budget recommendation, I am proposing that these state agencies absorb the estimated cost of the merger. Now let me focus, if I may, on our state's economy. It is the state of the overall economy that has drawn my attention and the attention of many of you. On the surface, the state of the state's economy is solid and it is sound. But we must ask ourselves, does that same condition exist in all of Nebraska's 93 counties? The economy in our metropolitan areas and larger counties is experiencing growth that we can be extremely proud of. The economic engine is working and driving the general indicators of prosperity within our state. Quite honestly, the economy in our rural areas and more sparsely populated counties has been adversely impacted by the crisis that has afflicted agriculture. Many parts of our state need our help in diversifying their local economy in addition to a much needed boost for agriculture. The problems caused by a lack of diversification in the rural economy coupled with low commodity prices will take time to overcome and, in my judgment, require a comprehensive approach. Nebraska is very definitely confronted with a two-track economy. If we accomplish just one thing together in this session, it should be to balance economic opportunity from east to west and north to south. I believe the Rural Economic Opportunities Act will do exactly that. I want to pause for a moment and say thank you to Senator Jerry Matzke for leading this legislative initiative. But I also want to say thank you to the 34 cosponsors of this very important state legislation. This economic development tool will fill in the